

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE  
AUGUSTA, GEORGIA

31 May 48

Dear Sidney:

Have been delayed in returning this interesting MS by my hope each day of writing at length. You expressed in your letter with remarkable accuracy my own reaction to Carson, as well as your own. I want very much to see her again & I think she's coming to see us this summer. We were in a difficult position in Wash. because of Connor & Charlie being there & this made it hard for us to get the chance to see Carson (also Alex). I am so glad we had at least a brief meeting. We are counting on you.

staying with us when you come,  
I wish it might be so that Carson  
can come at the same time.  
Louise is planning to write you  
tomorrow or next day and  
will give more detail about this.

Your letter made us happy.  
It was such a good letter to  
get. I am still going to write  
at greater length soon.

Harvey

I was so much interested  
in this MS about Carson that  
I made a copy of it.

Publishers often complain that the South writes more books than it buys. All over the States in the twentieth century we have seen the static life of small towns to be both the frustration and the inspiration of young talents. Particularly is this true of the Southern towns and hamlets, which seem to inspire the most feverish talents of all. In my opinion, one of the best of these talents is that of Carson McCullers.

Born in 1917, Carson Smith grew up in Columbus, Georgia, a typical Southern town, its one distinction perhaps being the Army post of Fort Benning. Carson's family were by no means well-to-do; her father, a watchmaker, received little demand for his skill from the citizens of Columbus. In Southern terminology the Smiths would be labeled "good people, but poor". As an interesting aside on the family, a cousin of Carson's has written from Florida to say that "the family has seen prosperous days, are descended from aristocratic stock, lost several officers in the War between the States, and are not proud of Carson's fame one bit." "Her mother is a refined lady," the cousin writes, "and Mother and I cannot imagine where Carson picked up her language or her knowledge of the things she writes about."

As an adolescent, Carson developed a passion for good music, fine writing, and intellectual sympathy, behaving not at all in the usual pattern followed by Columbus schoolgirls. It is no wonder that limitations embittered her at an early age. Still, she refused to abandon her ambition to be a concert pianist. At fifteen, however, an illness forced her to slow down and avoid her rigid routine of practice. It was then, during this illness, that Carson began to write.

At first there were plays. She says of this phase :

My idol was Eugene O'Neil, and my first masterpiece was thick with incest, lunacy, and murder. The first scene was laid in a graveyard and the last was a catafalque. I tried to put it on in the family sitting-room, but only my mother and my eleven-year-old sister would cooperate . My father, who was startled and rather dubiously proud, bought me a typewriter. After that I dashed off a few more plays, a novel, and some rather queer poetry that nobody could make out, including the author.

For a while after high school graduation Carson worked on her hometown newspaper, the COLUMBUS ENQUIRER. At 17, with eyes on Juillard and Columbia she came to New York. On her second day in the city she lost all her tuition money on a subway. In order to remain in New York she was forced to work: playing the piano for a dancing class in a settlement house, clerking in a real estate office, and for a short time on the editorial staff of the comic sheet MORE FUN. None of these careers appealed to Carson, however, and sooner or later, she was fired from every job she had been hired for.

During this uncertain winter in the big city she went to school at night. But the city and the snow - she had never seen snow before - so overwhelmed her that she did no studying at all. In the spring she spent a lot of time "hanging around the piers making fine schemes for voyages".

Sylvia Bates' Fiction Workshop at New York University and Whit Burnett's course at Columbia's summer school provided Carson with considerably more than literary discipline. Under stimulation, she began to write in earnest, and late in 1936, Burnett introduced the nineteen-year-old girl to the readers of STORY magazine . Her first piece was significantly titled WUNDERKIND.

In 1937, Carson married a fellow Southerner, Reeves McCullers, and went to live in North Carolina. There she worked for about two years at her first novel, printed in 1940 under the publisher's title, THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER. The novel is about loneliness, man's isolation and his revolt against it. The author possesses a poet's insight in penetrating and revealing the inner nature of man. It is not overt behavior so much as what occurs in the minds of her characters that is important. The large needs of human affection and the insanely narrow limits set upon the satisfaction of these needs is seen to be a calamity of our time. The shabbiness of the actual is contrasted with the beauty of the imagined, the wished for and dreamed of. There is good in every man but that good is not allowed to grow; individuality loses itself in the unrelenting coils of society. We cannot grow outward; if we grow at all, it must be inward. This idea clearly echoes the poet, Robinson Jeffers.

The novel's eerie yet believable tale is set in a Southern mill town. A half-mad anarchist, a Negro doctor desperate to free his race, an adolescent girl who loves music, and a quiet cafe owner all come to share a mystical admiration for the deaf mute John Singer. The story is in fact an ironic parable on fascism. Out of Singer's stunned face and silence - he smiles and nods when utterly failing to comprehend - each of the four constructs an image of absolute understanding, a Godlike sounding board for prayerlike confessions. In short these people need are lonely hunters; they need a God, a Christ, or in Truman Capote's language, "someone to hold them and tell them that everything is going to be all right", and in their search they light upon Singer. The fact escapes them that the mute himself is even more piteously dependent, being possessed by an impossible dream of his

own. Also they do not realize that no one of them can understand the other, but when the four lose Singer, who commits suicide, three of them lose the mainspring of their precarious spirits. Only the restaurant owner remains relatively intact, having long since sunken into complete apathy.

The character drawn with the most feeling, the deepest insight and perspicacity is that of the adolescent girl. The author is emotionally and, one would think, often factually autobiographical in her treatment of Mick Kelly. Nowhere, I believe, have the pains of growing up, of stumbling toward reality been more poignantly revealed - unless in a later work by the same author, MEMBER OF THE WEDDING. This tomboy with her strange yen for another life than the drab one she knows, a life filled with music and beauty, is a major contribution to the list of <sup>memorable</sup> characters in fiction.

In the other characters there is that same self-torture and sense of futility that Faulkner gave us in LIGHT IN AUGUST, the book in which he <sup>have been</sup> seems to ~~be~~ most deeply concerned with characterization. The anarchist, the Negro doctor, and the cafe owner are all-strongly reminiscent of Faulkner's Christmas, Hightower, and Bunch respectively, but they seem more real, less grotesque.

This first novel won wide critical acclaim. Lorine Pruette said: "Without any lushness, with a hard maturity, Carson McCullers presents poor people in a town in the deep South, the sort that Dostoyevsky might have written about." And Richard Wright found the novel impressive because of "the astonishing humanity that enables a white writer, for the first time in Southern fiction, to handle Negro character with as much ease and justice as those of her own race". Wright's statement is

not altogether true, for Faulkner was undoubtedly the first to do justice by the Negro. ~~in spite of his reactionary political convictions~~

With the profits from *THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER* Carson returned to Manhattan in search of kindred spirits. Obsessed since childhood with a sense of exile, she called on literary exiles such as W. H. Auden and his wife. Soon she was joining the freakish household of aesthetes in Brooklyn Heights. There, sickly, shy, and elf-like, Carson predated over a dinner table whose steady boarders were Auden, Louis MacNeice, Benjamin Britten - the British composer, and George Davis, then literary editor of Harper's Bazaar and now of Mademoiselle. The house became the shabby mecca of friends - painters, musicians, all kinds of artistes, including Miss Gypsy Rose Lee. In spite of sherry bottles, inchoate housekeeping, atonal music, and inspired chit-chat, Carson got on with her writing. Nevertheless, after about a year of this life, her health did break, and on <sup>doctors'</sup> the advice of she returned to her home in Georgia for rest.

In 1941 came the second novel, this time with a title of the author's own choosing, *REFLECTIONS IN A GOLDEN EYE*. If the first book was "somewhat eerie", the second is simply strange, with no reservations. The *TIME* magazine reviewer said wrote: "It is not the work of a normal twenty-four -year-old girl. In its sphere the novel is a masterpiece - as mature and finished as James' *TURN OF THE SCREW*, though still more specialized."

A story about life as Carson sees fit to create it in a Southern Army camp, the book is almost desperately psychomedical. Within 183 pages a child is born with fingers grown together, an Army captain suffers from bisexual impotence, a half-witted private rides nude in the

woods, a stallion is tortured, a murder is done, and a heartbroken wife cuts off her nipples with garden shears.

This is dangerous material for a novel - one would expect nothing more than rank, arty melodrama. Actually, however, it is a skillful psychological study, and the tale is told with simplicity, insight, and a rare gift of phrase. Regarding structure and style, the second work reveals a marked improvement. Each word seems to fall in its place - with no gaps, no looseness, the book being just as tightly knit as James'. And while reading the novel, its tortures seem just as valid as the suburban tragedies of Farrell's or Dreiser's midwest. The TIME reviewer clinched his praise of the novel by writing: "It is as though William Faulkner saw to the bottom of matters which merely exite him, shed his stylistic faults, and wrote it all out with Tolstoyan lucidity."

Unfortunately, most of the criticism of Carson McCullers' writing starts from one point: she is classified as a member of the so-called "Southern Gothic school"; we are told that Southerners led by Willaim Faulkner write with brilliant intensity, but their subject matter usually runs to horror - sexual, psychological, economical. Sidney Carroll in a recent article on Tennessee Williams writes of the school of young Southern writers who gravitate around certain favorite facts of life: cripples, perversion, rape, and the beauty of it all. I think such an attack is unfortunate because it is very short-sighted, almost ridiculously so. It is a fact that , when one is writing about the deep South with any realism, there must be a sort of opiate quality, a black magic or Gothic element

in the writing. Undoubtedly because they are Southerners have  
Paulner, McCullers, Williams, and Capote/<sup>have</sup>successfully captured  
this essence of the land where the past often seems more alive  
than the present. And it is true that these writers sometimes  
repeat the unreality of the land or its decadent civilization  
on a personal, symbolical level in their characters.; but both  
faults - if they are faults at all or even limitations can be  
ascribed to any number of writers, including Tchekov and Hardy.  
One must also remember that Robinson Jeffers, no Southerner,  
has his "favorite facts of life". I am insisting that Carson  
McCullers has wide universal appeal and is definitely no  
regionalist. I call the term "Southern Gothicism" largely a  
hoax, or at least an all too handy tool of the critic who cannot  
resist cataloguing. Perhaps being born in the South is in part  
responsible for the similarity between Williams and McCullers  
writing, but it is a weak thread to hang from. There are others  
concerned with the same problems who are not Southern born,  
Jean Stafford, Gore Vidal, and Anais Nin.

To continue with Carson's life, during the war years she  
remained silent, publishing only an occasional short-story in  
the magazines, chiefly NEW YORKER. The young sister, Margarita,  
who had acted in the early sitting-room drama, came to New York  
and, displaying her own talent with the short-story, became  
George Davis's assistant fiction editor with MADEMOISELLE. Perhaps  
the most important event in Carson's life during the war was  
her meeting Tennessee Williams. Their devotion is one of the most  
appealing behind the scenes stories in current literature. Both  
possessed with the spirit sense of exile along with the spirit

*Am  
not  
sure  
of  
this*

of wanderlust, their tie is made strong by similarity in personality as well as mutual admiration and understanding. The summer of 1945 they lived and worked together on Nantucket, and from Carson's work came the third novel, MEMBER OF THE WEDDING, published in 1946. This novel goes back to the adolescent girl created in THE HEART IS A LONELY HUNTER. The plot is built around the girl's reaching for maturity ;it does not aim so high as the first novel but goes further in the direction taken. The twelve-year-old girl is nominally a different creation from Mick Kelly, but they share a great deal in common. There is little story: the young girl's brother is to be married, a thing that his sister cannot comprehend. She does not want to be left out of the experience, wants to be a member, to belong to something or somebody . We follow her painful experiences as she leaves innocence and draws nearer to adulthood. Most of the book has one setting, a backporch in another small Southern town, where a Negro servant, the girl, and a young boy cousin sit and pass the lazy summer afternoons eating and talking. The Negress listens to the girl's bewildered outpourings and relates her own tragedy. For she has been a member, has found something to belong to and lost it with the death of her husband. Now she sits and remembers snow in Cincinnati and all the little things that constituted her happiness. She keeps her dream and as she walks down the street often thinks she sees it but is always mistaken. The men she hopefully follows around a corner or down an alley may wear coats like her departed husband's or they may walk in the same manner, but they are not the same, they cannot fulfill the <sup>lost</sup> dream.

There is a great real dramatic power in this novel, and at Williams' insistence and encouragement, Carson made the book into a play, which the Theatre Guild will eventually produce. MEMBER OF THE WEDDING as a drama will have the same soft, beautifully unreal and magical quality

of THE GLASS MENAGERIE and will show the same deep understanding of human being, his actions and his motivation.

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